**Joe Nayquonabe Sr How the Drum Helped Me with My Sobriety**

When I was 11 years old, I was put on my uncle’s drum.  My job as the “drum warmer” was to help set up the drum and take care of it.  I was on my own to take care of this drum, but I asked a lot of questions.  I would give people a chance to respect the drum.  If they didn’t, I would take it away and my uncle would announce that the dance was over.

I was very responsible and handled the drum well at that age.  Later I was put on another drum known as the thunderbird drum.   At this drum I mostly watched the older men take care of the drum, and they showed me things like which way the drum should sit and which way the sticks should face.

After my uncle passed away, I became the head drum keeper of his drum.  I was again on my own but had a lot of support from other people.  They would help cook the food, help sing the songs, and answer any questions I might have about the drum.

Soon I had my own troubles, though.  I felt I wasn’t happy. I was using alcohol and not paying much attention to the drum.  I was doing what I needed to do to support my family, but I felt like something was missing.  I did my best to stop drinking, but it was difficult.

After five years of struggling, I started talking to Elders at the ceremonial dances about the way I was feeling.  The Elders said they noticed me at dances and that I was a model drum keeper.  “You know how to do everything,” they told me, “but you don’t know why you are doing it.”  I thought about it. Today I am still searching for the reasons.

As I get older, I grow more knowledgeable.  I still talk to people and I learn from them.  I am able to see both sides now, and I know I am heading in the right direction.  I also talk to a lot of Elders.  They helped me grow as a person and make peace with myself.

I learned that we owe our grandparents and ancestors for everything they did for us.  My grandparents are watching me, so I behave better.  One day I will meet them and what will they say to me? We owe it to our ancestors to be good, and I’m always trying to improve myself.

Recently I went to a ceremonial dance and the drum keepers asked me to say a prayer for the offerings and tobacco.  I agreed, and I felt honored.  On the way home from the dance, I talked to my sons about how things always come back around.  Forty years ago, I was getting thrown out of dances, and now I was asked to speak at a dance.  Since speaking at that dance, I feel respected and have been asked to sit on three other drums.

I’ve learned that there’s always a reason why things happen.  A while back I was looking for a namesake for my son.  A white man’s name kept coming to mind.  I spoke with an Elder, and the Elder told me to choose this man even if he is not Indian because there was a reason his name came to me.  So I picked this man to be my son’s namesake. There was a reason the white man’s name came to me, and there was a reason why I was picked to speak at the dance.  It goes to show you that everything happens for a reason.

Sometimes it’s tough living in this world, but we need to try.  Go see someone you respect if you are in trouble ­­– it’s their duty to help you.  With all the drum ceremonies, I am becoming a better person.  I still get frustrated, but I can deal with my frustrations.  And I’m trying to help people, just like the drum helped me.